

And the Galaxy Burns

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Summary: Tales don't start at one discrete place, one discrete point in time where everything went to hell. They don't end like that either. They're...a mix, dozens, hundreds of people of varying importance, thrown into events that shake the galaxy at different points and different times. Entering and exiting seemingly at random. And, in the chaos, is a story told as the galaxy burns

1. Prologue: Chocolate Rain

****December 25, 2188, Kalpi, New Hyderabad, Siddhartha System, Hanuman's Arm****

The sky was beautiful today, the first time since the Reaper War ended. Not a cloud in sight, no choking layers of dust descending to ruin her day, no burnt out husks of reapers or satellites or warships falling from orbit. It was a day that, by all rights, should have been perfect, Kali's tits, as far as Layla was concerned, it was perfect. Excellent deal on fabrics and omnigel at Hassan's, her prosthetic arm had stopped bothering her, and Jalal at the bookstore had stopped making fun of her skin-weaves. It was unfortunate that the important word in her analysis of the day was, well, _ was._

The PSA announcing an imminent pirate attack had, unfortunately, rendered that analysis decidedly past tense. Especially with the nearest Alliance reinforcements nearly twelve hours away by Slipspace, fourteen away by standard FTL. She wondered what it was as she sprinted down Lodi Avenue for the nearest fallout shelter. There weren't any Primacy Remnant forces in the cluster, so this probably wasn't a terror run. Maybe a Kiggie raider group? Or some chucklefuck of a hotshot out of the Terminus? Either was possible, Kiggies meant a commerce raid, maybe some grabs for food, but they had Alliance Army on colony, the Kiggies wouldn't bother going for people against an armed defense.

A traitorous thought reminded her that she was not, in fact, behind an armed defense, and she involuntarily increased her pace,

practically sprinting over unfinished road, as she thought of the other possibility.

A Terminus Raider could mean anything. Some dumbass of a pirate out for slaves, someone ought to make an 'example' of an alliance colony, none of the options were good, and, as her treacherous brain insisted on reminding her, none of them were things she was in position to prevent. She checked her omni again, looking up the distance to the shelter from where she was. A helpful little dial told her it was one and a half miles from her current position. Reasonable distance, about eight minutes at a decent speed for her. As for the pirates...they'd been picked up on radar, it'd take them awhile to approach at sublight, then they'd have to scan the planet and pick a target. And depending on what they'd brought, they might have to deploy transports.

She did some basic math and decided that she had thirty minutes, plenty of time to make it to the-

The calamitous boom of warships entering the atmosphere at speed interrupted her train of thought. Layla skidded to a stop on the sidewalk and blinked hard, as if reassuring herself that what she'd just heard was real, and then turned around with the agonized lethargy of someone who knew exactly what they were going to see..

"Well shit," she said as she stared at the three vessels, cruisers each easily five hundred meters long, swiftly approaching well over Kalpi's skyscrapers, "That's a lot of missiles." And indeed it was, dozens, hundreds of points of light were flying from the three cruisers, streaking towards the city as the vessels passed. Kalpi was going to die, and the warships wouldn't even have to fire their accelerators.

Layla thought about running, hiding, attempting to take cover in some desperate bid to survive, but she'd been through the Reaper War, she'd served her time with the UNSC, and then the Alliance after them. She knew that against that many missiles the meager cover she could reach would mean precisely nothing. So she stared at them, bore witness as the death of her, and the other four million civilians in Kalpi, approached. A thousand points of light, one coming straight at her, heralding death.

They shattered as they approached, splitting a cloud of indistinct dark shapes that rained upon the town. Cluster munitions, she imagined, perhaps guided. They fell towards the city, arcing down into the streets and buildings as they lost momentum. She imagined they were probably Archer or Crossbows, or a Terminus Equivalent. Plasma penetrator to get through bunkers or building tops, smart sensor to detonate when someone approached. A dozen, a hundred arced towards her, becoming more defined, more...rectangular as they approached. No guidance system, they simply fell. Definitely Crossbows, Layla decided, Archers were larger and guided. She stared at them as they closed within a hundred meters, made peace with the gods, and accepted her fate. A munition hit her in the chest.

And then...nothing. No explosion, no pain, no screams or wreckage or carnage. She heard the cruisers pass and accelerate, presumably leaving the colony. She felt the fading twinge where the munition hit her. She scrunched her eyes up, confused, bent down and grabbed the

munition off the battered street.

A cursory look informed her that it was not a bomb but, in fact, tinfoil. A second look told her that it wasn't a munition at all, but instead some sort of individually wrapped chocolate bar. She was looking at the back, which was covered in helpful nutrition facts, in compliance with some Terminus Based Food and Drug regulator. She flipped it over and was greeted by an animated holo, a pair of turian females in an obnoxious asari style. They jumped into the air, bumped fists, and landed a 'V and V Dextro Xocol!' logo flashing into place above them. Examination revealed that the female on the right was in fact a very feminine male with a short fringe. A large, friendly warning label on the left of the bar said "Dextro only! If Levo, do not eat!"

"What the fuck?" asked Layla.

2. Chapter One: Things Everyone Hates

****March 18, 2176, HDSS-98, Unknown System, Unknown Cluster****

Ninety Nine point Nine percent of deep space exploration missions were boring as all fuck, consisting of nothing more interesting than repeatedly stopping for minerals, and occasionally stopping on a planet to look at rock formations and gather supplies for up to ten years. Most of the other point one percent ended in the explorer committing suicide.

As far as Drusus was concerned, his mission evermore began to look like the point one percent. No entertainment, no porn, nothing interesting to do. A decade in the Hierarchy Military, and five years in fucking Blackwatch, wasted on long stretches of cryo interrupted by surveying and sending report drones back home through slipspace. Really, rigging up the damn eezo core to blow was sounding more tempting each jump. A tantalizing, inglorious ending that would be the perfect cap to the boring, inglorious slog that had been this mission.

He strode across the cramped, ever-white confines of the shuttle over to the navigational controls, typing out a command line he'd had ready for weeks. A simple thing, disabling the inertial dampening for his next jump to FTL. An instant death, painless, a one way trip to the spirits and an ending to his miserable, endlessly boring ride through space. He decided against it, deleting the line and walking away from the terminal. He debated punching into the only extranet feed he could access this far in deepspace, then reminded himself it was a Tyche Vidcast feed, and resolved to die before accessing it. He punched in the co-ordinates to the next system, hopped into his cryo pod, and flipped it on, resolving to survive yet another damned system.

He blinked once, then twice, then a third time as his eyelids grew ever heavier. His mandibles fluttered once and finally, as the pod grew cold, his eyelids drew shut.

He dreamed of...nothing in particular as he slept. Faint memories of turian women and the dim, forgotten reasons why he'd entered the Deep Space Exploration programs. Memories, good and ill, from his time in the military and Blackwatch. The many, many reasons he'd learned to

hate his damned job and the damned promises that were made when he got in, and the _stupid xenmashit_ some joker of a logistics officer had snuck onto his ship before he left.

What sick son of a bitch gives a Deep Space Explorer _condoms_?

He awoke what felt like moments later, despite the chronometers insistence that five days had passed, having forgot the everything he'd dreamed of save a faint sense of burning hate towards his logistics officer. He pushed on the pods doors and stepped out as the damned thing swung open. He stretched for a moment as he called for a report from the computer, shaking the weariness and cold of cryosleep from his limbs, then warming his carapace with a hotplate and dropped a medicated gastrolith into his gullet. The computer spat streams of nav-data in an annoyingly monotone voice, nothing of interest, some basic information about the planet, some boring shit about local phenomena that could kick him out of FTL or Slipospace. Nothing of the ordinary. More boring xenmashit stars had their absurd bulks scanned, data on them scrolling across his terminal for the better part of three hours. Then followed more boring xenmashit planets for another seven. More boring xenmashit asteroid belts. Boring xenmashit outer-system object. Boring xenmashit-

"Computer, repeat data on last satellite," said Drusus, his voice harsh from disuse.

"Object 3HJ-1M-2AB-Bastion is a terrestrial moon approximately eighteen light minutes from Star Auroch-Sentinel-822-"

"No, not that one you stupid machine, the one before it."

"Object 1AA-0A-0AA-Auroch is an artificial structure constructed at approximately six light minutes from star Auroch-Sentinel-82-J-KL. Construction style and materials consistent with Precursor Race codename "Type-Forerunner". Age is Approximately one hundred and thirty four thousand three hundred years before current date. Object is five thousand kilometers in radius, ninety kilometers deep, and approximately one hundred kilometers wide. Object is a band, reminiscent of a ring, halo or corona."

"Right, prep a Report Probe, start spinning up the slipospace calcs," said Drusus, decade old training flooding back to him as his fingers danced across the shuttles controls, engaging a thousand more in depth scans of the objects. He did a few short calculations and then typed co-ordinates into the ships nav computer, initiating a two second FTL burst to close with the structure, "Begin warmup procedures on the HER. Object is now to be referred to as Corona-Auroch, and will be referred to as such in the drones automated report. Prepare a second drone for a hand-written report once we finish on the surface. Classify both drones as Priority Sentinel-" The ship moved to FTL for a long pair of seconds, then dropped out within visual range of the ring. Drusus stared, speechless.

The ring was titanic, awe inspiring and beautiful. The outer edge was a tapestry of blue and steel-grey, glowing nodes and ridges breaking up the featureless band. It was huge, stretching farther than the eye could see both up and down. Drusus grabbed the control, eyeballing his way around the outer band of the ring and gazing at its sheltered interior. The interior was, if anything, more beautiful than the

outer edge. Oceans and landmasses, mountain ranges, an entire ecosystem, all contained within one artificial, titanic ring. The construct dwarfed the citadel, Omega, any station that Drusus had seen or heard of in his entire life. It was incredible, it was awe-inspiring, it was, naturally, ruined by the computers interruption.

"Classification 'Sentinel-Holy-Spirit-Shit-I've-Gotta-Get-Closer' is not a valid priority level. Please repeat," said the computer in its monotone voice, utterly unaware of what it had interrupted.

"Fucking piece of shit," muttered Drusus as his head snapped back towards the terminal. He pulled an ident chit from a compartment on his hardsuits chest and plugged it into the terminal. "Classification Sentinel-Auroch, Hard Confirmation: Type-Forerunner megastructure, possible ruins." The computer chimed, indicating that the first report drone had been deployed and would be receiving data for the next few hours before departing for Hierarchy Space. He ignored it, poring over data from the ships scanners, looking for landing spots and interesting features. Oceans, boring, no structures in them, he skipped over them. Forests, some mountains. Many islands, some with structures. Lods of viable landing sites, but nothing...spectacular. He'd found an actual forerunner megastructure, and for all intents and purposes, it was the same boring _utter xenmashit_ that he'd been exploring for the past two years.

Three hours later he found the canyons. Thirty meters deep, fifty wide, hundreds of feet long, glass-smooth.

All entirely identical. They were bracketing the region, and mineral composition data indicated that, at some point, there was a forerunner structure in the center of one of them.

"Those aren't natural, weapons fire? Bombardment, I think. Plasma? No, formation's wrong, too widespread, too...uniform. Can't be mass accelerators, especially at those angles, no impact craters. Lasers? No, not precise enough, they wouldn't have needed to refire that many times to hit a standing structure with lasers," Drusus mused. His mandibles fluttered as he attempted to puzzle out the mystery of the blast canyons. After a few moments, within which no sane solutions popped up, he decided to land by the canyon network. The HER had more advanced sensors that would be invaluable in figuring out exactly what the fuck wiped a Forerunner station from the face of this structure.

"Alert: Primacy Vessel detected at displayed co-ordinates. 450 meters in length, Chorus Class Cruiser. Estimated Capacity: 1500 lifeforms. Vessel is landed next to Type-Forerunner facility labelled Lorica," noted the computer in its ever-monotone voice. Drusus was suddenly rather glad he hadn't begun to eat yet. His talons, grey carapace cracked from a lack of proper hygiene, practically danced across the keyboard, bringing up pictures of the Chorus and the forerunner structure.

The Chorus wasn't anything new or impressive. 450 meters in length, a spinal accelerator and plasma broadsides, minimal GARDIAN, Kinetic and Plasma shielding. It was a cut-and-paste Primacy Cruiser, meant to carry Sanghelli and their troops to battlegrounds and die horribly to Turian warships. The aesthetics were nothing revolutionary, the constant curves and allergy to the right angle that had plagued the

Primacy well before the Hanar took over slathered liberally with a garish, eye-searing paintjob that was as much a crime against fashion as anything else.

Facility Lorica was much more interesting. Six outcroppings rising above ground level in a circular pattern, but their design told Drusus that there was more of the facility extending underground. Odd design, like a fortress, except...facing inwards. It seemed familiar for some reason and Drusus cross-referenced it with known Forerunner installations almost reflexively, some particularly nasty part of his mind reminding him that all he'd likely found was a bunch of Primacy dumbasses worshipping a Type-Forerunner shopping center.

Then the search returned results and a warning label. Drusus' mandibles both widened in horror as he read the terminal's display. He did some quick calculations, probabilities, things the Primacy could know, things they could not, what their presence on the world indicated they were prepared for. After a moment he made a decision.

"Computer, add a note to the drone, attach these pictures, request a Blackwatch Purgation Squad dispatched to Corona-Auroch," he said as he brought the shuttle into the atmosphere of the megastructure, "I have a Primacy ship to save."

****March 18, 2176, Object Corona-Auroch, Unknown System, Unknown Cluster****

"Link my camera and vox feeds to the next survey probe," declared Drusus as he donned the heavy hardsuit and powered skeleton that made up the heaviest equivalent to battle-armor he could fabricate on the trip to the Object's surface, "Automatic sendoff in two days. Same priority as the first drone. Probably Type Flood confirmation." Seals hissed into place on the hardsuit as he put the airlock through decontamination procedures. A basic heads up display, primitive compared to what most forces in council space were issued, shimmered into place on the inside of his helmet, showing his vitals and the strength of his Kinetic Barriers. He pulled down the drone release, dropping both the second survey probe and the HER off outside the ship, and then slammed the bright green door button, letting himself into the airlock.

The airlock, an incredibly cramped thing meant for one, cycled the atmosphere for the one outside, testing it for contaminants and keeping the shuttle from being spoiled with whatever was within the atmosphere. Paranoid, perhaps, the atmospheric scans he'd finished on the way down implied that he could walk outside naked for an indefinite period of time and be entirely fine, a first in his two years exploring poisonous gasballs and radioactive deserts. Really, for the first time in two years, he could step out of the suit, walk into the environment, and, if he forgot the possible end of the galaxy he'd landed to prevent, fucking relax. Drink some water that wasn't filtered a thousand times and utterly stale, find a dextro fruit tree.

Of course, that would require forgetting about the possible end of galactic civilization, so Drusus settled for cursing his career choice. He donned his makeshift armor, retrieved a heavy pistol from the shuttle's weapon fabricator, and moved towards the HER to continue with his mission.

At three meters tall, supported by over half a dozen arm-like limbs, and armed with both a trio of mass accelerators and a bevy of survey and sensor equipment, the Hostile Environmental Reconnaissance Drone, better known as The HER, was the premier reconnaissance vehicle in deep space exploration. Likely because it was the only reconnaissance vehicle in deep space exploration. A government-funded field that consisted of exploring poisonous gasballs with hurricane force acid winds and surviving attacks by monsters that spat acid potent and accurately enough to shoot transport shuttles out of the sky with no real resupply resulted in a bit of a dearth of options.

Drusus made a power-armor assisted leap, soaring to the top of the HER's cylindrical body. He slammed the hatch control, perhaps a bit harder than necessary, and dropped into the cockpit. Magnetic clamps fastened him to the back of the elongated cockpit, locking him into a standing position in front of the cramped cockpits complex controls. He flipped several switches, turning on the advanced sensor equipment and external cameras, then engaged the engine. The entire vehicle rumbled to life, legs skittering across the ground as he maneuvered it out from underneath the shuttle's bulk.

Systems roared to life as the drone moved into the forest. A dizzying array of scanners and atmospheric sensors blinked to life, blaring data about atmospheric composition, external temperature, local atmospheric pressure and the like. Automated sampler arms darted out from the sides, grabbing soil and plant life samples for analysis as Drusus pushed the HER into a six-legged lope towards the waypoint he'd created on the way down. Barring something going horribly wrong with his cartographical systems on the way down, or some major restructuring of the local landscape within the next hour, the waypoint would lead him straight to the primacy cruiser, hopefully in time to keep them from getting themselves killed.

The transit was lengthy, and mostly consisted of watching the local wildlife. Lumbering, saurian quadrupeds with yellow-scale skin and titanic spines lining their backs ran away from the drone as it loped past at eighty kilometers an hour. Packs of blind, yellow-green mammals with nostrils like talon-wounds attempted to keep pace with the drone, leaping after it as it left them far behind. Alien birds took off from nearby trees in a cascade of millions of colors. A family-unit of brown-furred quadrupeds with short tusks waited up ahead, just off the drone's path. A near-forgotten memory of a nature holo insisted they were an earth mammal. A Puma, maybe? Or a Boar? Drusus shrugged, writing it off as odd coincidence as he zipped through the forest.

After another couple of rocks and a near brush with a particularly stupid and slow herbivore the size of a corvette, Drusus began to hear gunfire. "Just my fucking luck, the things get loose before I get there," he muttered, squeezing another few kilometers and hour out of the HER as he approached. Motion sensors popped up, giving him a small, circular display on the HER's viewscreen that displayed all movement within about half a kilometer. It was choked with dots to the point that it was almost-useless. "Fucking shitsack," he muttered as he fiddled with the controls, "Code Flood pops up, combat sensors validate, and the damn things aren't smart enough to track high-mass only. The fuck do I need to know where every fucking bug for half a click is?" The motion detector cleared up quite a bit, still showing many false positives where particularly large animals were moving,

but becoming something other than entirely useless in the process. The battle site became obvious, two large contacts that were obviously vehicles, accompanied by five infantry-sized contacts, were pursuing twelve infantry sized contacts.

Drusus judged the battle as he approached. No movement small enough to be infection forms, and there hadn't been any before he'd narrowed the sensors parameters. Either side could be using the vehicles. Primacy troops wouldn't be committing this sort of pursuit without air cover or drones, and the E-War suite on the HER, which was admittedly pretty basic, hadn't noticed any active drones. It was, admittedly, possible that they'd lost their drones and air support, which would explain their relatively cautious pursuit. The vehicles were small, far too small to be tanks or assault cannons. Primacy recon vehicles of some sort, he guessed. Ungoy Scout Cycles or T-32 General Recon, in all likelihood, a T-25 was possible, but if the Flood had eaten its pilot, they wouldn't be using it as conservatively as they seemed to, and no jiralhanae or krogan would be hanging back like that when there were enemies to crush. Safe bet was to assume vics were hostile, he could always switch targets if they weren't.

His talons danced across the controls of the drone, and two of the accelerators on the front of the drone began tracking, each locking onto one of the vehicles as he strode towards them.

One hundred meters, the audio sensors lowered their output level so as not to deafen Drusus with the sound of battle. A stray plasma round flew into a tree from ahead of him. He couldn't see the battle, which was odd. He checked the motion-sensors again, and they confirmed he was headed the right way.

fifty meters, he angled for a small hill, planning to cut between the forces. He could hear yelling, too faint to translate properly. Though he couldn't see the battle itself, he could see where it was raging, more or less, a ravine formed by fallen trees and overgrown forerunner structures a good forty meters in front of him. Sensors told him it was a good eighteen meters across, narrow and winding, and he wouldn't have a decent shot until he was very literally directly over it. He could tell that the primacy orders were coming from the pursued group, not the pursuers, which had unfortunate implications.

He crossed the last forty meters in slightly over an instant, pushing the machine into a titanic leap that would put it squarely in the ravine. He crossed the lip, the pair of vehicles coming into view as the gunfire and screams raged ever-louder around him, and opened fire.

The vehicles were both Type-32s, large, rounded hovering scoutbikes used by Sangheili and similarly-sized members of the Primacy for reconnaissance and infantry support. The one on the left, a deep purple model that likely once belonged to a sangheili major, was heavily damaged. Its cockpit had been ripped out, presumably when the tentacle-covered, mucus colored quarian combat form that had taken the helm ripped out its previous occupant, and its leftmost accelerator cannon had been disabled by plasma fire. The little armor plating it had was tattered, plasma and helium-3 venting from its wounded innards. The cycle on the left, one of the ubiquitous 'Ghost' models that had seen service across the galaxy, was in significantly

better shape. Its cockpit had, like the other, been ripped off. A smaller hole on this one, likely a breach for an infection form to get at the poor sangheili driving the thing. It had relatively little damage, a few plasma scars on its armor plating, but both of its plasma cannons were, as the streams of fire it was pouring towards the fleeing primacy troops showed, functioning perfectly.

Drusus took a deep breath, squeezing both of the HER's controls as it fell into the ravine. Streams of incendiary munitions flew from the HER's three accelerators, raking both recon bikes. The leftmost model swerved, losing its left plasma cannon as incendiary rounds popped its barriers and ripped towards its pilot. Three rounds pierced the armored cockpit, cracking the infected sangheili's shielding and setting one of its arms alight. The other Type-32 wasn't so lucky, its kinetic barriers failed once the first rounds slammed into its carapace, and the rest of the burst ripped straight into the recon bike's innards, flaming munitions detonating its fuel in a cataclysmic explosion of purple plasma and burning helium. Drusus cheered silently at the victory as the HER hit the floor of the ravine.

He pushed the HER to his left, strafing the surviving Type-32 with more incendiaries as the flood began to return fire. The 32 detonated, the mangled sangheili combat form piloting it leaping clear as Drusus sunk incendiary rounds into the scout cycle's cockpit and primary drive systems, rendering it immobile and unable to aim. The sangheili driver was...grotesque. Its body had swollen, bursting through the mangled remains of its still-shining red armor, its skin had turned a sickly yellow, the color of mucus or a particularly diseased kig-yar. One arm had been mangled and warped, turned into a monstrous betentacled limb, the other was visibly broken at two places, its ruined claws clutching a damaged, charging Deliverance pistol.

Drusus swore as he noticed the pistol, swinging the guns towards the dodging combat form. Rounds lanced out shredding the spot the former sangheili had already leapt from. He managed to wing it, once, dropping its barely-functioning plasma shields with a single round before the monstrosity managed to get behind a particularly large rock. Drusus backed up, scanning the battlefield for the other combat forms. He watched the sangheili-forms cover, waiting to dodge a plasma round.

The Primacy troops had managed to down one of the infected when he'd destroyed the thirty-twos, a monstrous, well, more monstrous corpse of a former jiralhanae. Its fur had fallen out, its skin turned into the swollen yellow mass of a combat form, its jaw had split open, sprouting feelers. It had been downed by combined accelerator and plasma fire, relieved of both its arms by the fullisade. A primacy Evangelist rifle lay by its side, a distended, yellow paw hanging limply from its handle. Two others, a mutated, bulging mass that had once been a quarian and an infected unggoy with a Purgation cannon had taken cover behind debris when he'd entered the ravine.

That left one more. Where the spiritsdamned fuck-

Electricity coursed through the HER's controls, motor control and secondary systems cycling off. He'd been hit with a charged Deliverance round. The drone lowered, settling itself on its array of spindly legs as Drusus attempted to boot motor control. He fired the

turrets, ripping apart yet more of the visible floods cover, as he cycled off power to the systems to try a hard restart. He'd found the last combat form.

There was a thud, as if something had landed, atop the HER. Drusus slammed an emergency release, disengaging maglocks. He fell to the floor, drawing his rifle in a smooth motion. There was a horrible screech that his suits systems muted to bearable levels, and the HER's dorsal hatch was ripped off. A tentacle, silhouetted against the sky above, descended into the HER. Drusus leapt, firing.

There was an impact. The flood, an infected krogan, was knocked back a step as Drusus practically flew out of the drone's interior. Drusus pushed off the krogan, pouring accelerator rounds into it as he landed on the HER's roof. The combat form's shield dropped as it reacted, firing a pair of plasma bolts into his shields ineffectually. Drusus grinned ferally as the accelerator pushed ever-further towards the 'overheating' line, ripping chunks of grisly flesh off the krogan as the infected beast recoiled. Then, suddenly, Drusus felt a tightness in his lower chest. He looked down, saw the tentacle wrapped around his torso, and met the infected Krogan's distorted grin with a shout of "Fuck!" before he was tossed off the drone at truly dazzling speeds.

He hit one of the Ravine's sides in an explosion of billowing dust and smoke. His shields, decidedly depleted, were screaming at him, and he had pain in places he didn't think you could have pain. His camera feeds from the exosuits helmet had broken, but he could hear the combat form approaching. He fumbled for a release lever, throwing the sealed helmet away and inhaling wonderful, fresh air as he looked for the combat form and his gun. He saw a flash of metal and dived sideways, sheltering behind a rock as accelerator rounds slammed into the ground behind him.

The krogan combat form had his gun. Fuck.

He scanned his hardsuit for inbuilt weapons. Rock scrapers, torch, both useless. Core sampler. Eighteen inch, sharp, superheated, could cut through a Hierarchy Standard Issue Breastplate, or the idiocy on a standard Tyche program, which was far more impressive. He flicked a wrist, deploying the sampler, and leaned out to check where the Krogan was as his shields recharged.

That was when an airborne krogan kicked him in the back of the head. He went sprawling, shields blaring once again as they depleted. He rolled, dodged a shot as he wiped mud from his facial carapace. Another shot, hit him in the chest armor, no real damage. A giant foot landed on his chest, and the Krogan combat form leaned over him. It levelled its pistol at his head.

There was an exhilarated yell, and a golden-yellow blur knocked the Krogan forwards, causing it to stumble over Drusus. It yelled, whipping its tentacle back, only to receive a spray of crystalline shards to the chest that sent the blow wild. A kig-yar, a skirmisher champion judging by the golden armor, stepped over him, an Inquisition shotgun, of all things, in his claws. He chirped a challenge, crowing as he blasted another set of shards into the Combat Form's chest. Then, in a moment of glorious carnage, the crystals reacted to each other, glowing bright pink for the briefest of moments before ripping the krogan apart in a cataclysmic orgy of

purple explosion and yellow ichor.

Three more Primacy troops, a pair of unggoy with Evangelist rifles and a quarian with a Salvation, advanced bringing down the remaining flood in a flurry of accelerator and plasma fire. They whooped victory cries, albeit half-hearted ones, and motioned backwards towards the rest of the Primacy group.

Drusus picked himself up, walking towards his helmet as the kig-yar approached. He grabbed it as the skirmisher closed to within a few meters. Mild damage to the cameras, some wiring issues, he could do the repairs with his omni, but it'd take a few minutes. Armor was intact, as was its low-velocity kinetic barrier system.

"Saved our asses back there, Hierarchy," said the kig-yar, tapping on his shoulder, "Why are you on a Sacred Halo?"

"Hierarchy DSE," said Drusus as he began repairing his helmet, "Saw the ruins, knew what you were in for, decided someone had to save your lives. How bad is the flood infection at the moment?"

"More prudently, how did you know that...these things were in the ruins? We assumed they were left by the Theocracy expedition, some booby-trap for future explorers, the Hierarchy should have no knowledge of them," replied the kig-yar.

"Because some of the galaxy's denizens aint total fucking morons?" said Drusus, leaning forwards, "What, you think DSE only accepts fucking blackwatch because we're scared of running into a coupla large bugs? We've run into the flood before."

"I just saved your life, Unenkindled," snarled Kag, "You could at least have some basic manners."

"And I saved yours, so...sure, yeah, whatever" said Drusus as he grabbed the Evangelist and checked it for damage, "After we save your ship, and the rest of the galaxy, from horrible, grisly death. Drusus Octavius, by the way, Hierarchy Deep Space Asshole Division."

"Space Asshole?" asked the kig-yar, obviously tetchy.

"Space Explorers? Space Assholes?" said Drusus, "The pun don't translate to Primacy Standard, does it?"

"No," replied the skirmisher as he looked over Drusus, "No it doesn't."

"Well, I can already see this is going to be an excellent working relationship," replied Drusus, "Look, we don't have a hell of a lot of time to waste, so how 'bout you give me your name, help me fix the HER and you can give me the briefing and questioning while we try to save your damned ship."

"Kag," replied Kag, "Kig-yar Champion upon the Divine Light of Enkindlement. Saleem and the science team will help your repair your vehicle. But you will give me an explanation before we're done here."

The drone was repaired within the hour, and another ten minutes saw the group off towards the Primacy cruiser and, in all likelihood, a

distressing amount of flood. Drusus would have complained, but he'd managed to get something that passed for social activity in exchange for probable grisly death at the hand of galaxy-devouring horrors.

He called that an even trade.

****March 12, 2176, Righteous Light of Ascension, First Halo of the Forerunners, Unnamed System (Currently Epiphany), Revelation Cluster****

Valor's head hung low, his long neck drooping as sweat dripped down his glistening yellow skin. He strode through the cruiser's brightly painted halls, into the observation deck that overlooked the Divine Light of Enkindlement's training grounds. He gave a nod to the decks crew as he stepped through the bright sliding doors. The young san'shyuum detached his helmet, a slight grin playing across his face as he greeted the crew, congratulating them on an excellent exercise. He wiped his brow with the back of one hand as he strode towards the command seat, then froze as he stared at it.

There was someone in his command seat. A drell, female, green, covered in consecrated insignia.

And, floating behind her like a harbinger of the enkindler's will, the vessel's Hanar Minister, The Minister of Theology.

He immediately knelt, donning his helmet in a single, fluid motion as he bowed to his superiors. He tilted his head forwards, looking straight at the floor and intensely studying its pattern as he waited. There was a tense silence, punctuated only by the hum of the ship's systems and the buzz of the Minister's gravity belt.

"The other should rise," spoke the Hanar finally, the glow of its speech reflecting off the walls and floor of the room, "This one does not deserve the reverence it is shown by the Honored Other." Valor lifted his head, an eyebrow raised as he attempted to discern if the Minister was serious. After a moment, wherein he decided that nothing in the Hanar's glow indicated humor, he began to rise slowly and reverently, keeping his eyes averted from the Ministers Holy Visage. The drell before the minister made a short sound, somewhere between a feminine laugh and an amused snort. Her lip, though as a pious san'shyuum Valor would never reveal he knew her gender, twitched upwards slightly.

"You honor me with your presence, Minister of Theology," said Valor, standing at a disciplined attention that could only be achieved with the eyes of the divinely-touched Hanar watching him, "To what do I owe this great honor?"

There was a short strobe from the Minister, a short, benign burst of laughter. "The Other is far too formal," said the Minister, casting glorious pink and blue strobes across the room, "This one is called Darun, and it merely wished to discuss the Sacred Ring, and a discovery that the Honored Theology Team has encountered. Such formality in The Other's own command post is unnecessary, though it reflects well upon the piousness of The Other. Truly its appointment to Templar of Sacred Valor was deserved." All eyes in the room were on the Minister, the entire crew now openly watching him in respect, surprise and reverence. Valor was grinning inside, though he dared

not show it. The Minister himself had complemented him, it was an honor equal to, if not greater than, the honor of witnessing the Sacred Ring.

"There was also a mild manner of the bloody warbeasts, Darun," said the Drell rudely, "Think that might've merited a mention, eh?" Every single person in the chamber turned openly staring at the Drell who dared to be so rude. If it was anyone else who had said what she just had they may very well have been shot, or at least arrested on the spot. But the culprit was a member of The second most exalted species in the entire Primacy. The species closest to the Enkindlers than all save The Most Holy Hanar. None in the room could process what they saw, and certainly couldn't react to it, so they gazed on, utterly speechless.

"The Other Isavi does not need to be so sudden. The Other is causing undue consternation among the congregation, and this one was going to reach that matter in a less abrupt fashion," said The Minister, casting soft, amused tones across the chamber as if it had just heard a funny joke, "But as the Other has already bridged the conversation, would it be so kind as to play the Optical Disk the Other Saleem has given to us? This One is no expert on military matters, and believes that the Other would be a far more effective medium to present this information."

"Cor'," said Isavi. She flicked her wrist and an omnitool materialized around her bright green hand. She darted around Darun and waved at the primary holoprojector, turning towards Valor and the rest of the command chamber as the machine hummed to life. "As the good Minister was getting to, Theologician Saleem's survey team found some nasty fuckers inhabiting one of the Holy Relics at the Temple Site. A Gruul warship got here before us." There was a hiss from the kig-yar crewmembers, and a red-armored sangheili, Rtak, bellowed a curse at the Primacy's ancient foe. One of the Yanme'e clicked profanities angrily, to Isavi's evident approval. Valor had to stop himself from grimacing, but the considerable self control his training had ingrained served him well. "Yeah, those fuckers are here. And they have the audacity to defile the Sacred Ring itself," she continued, eliciting further outrage from the crew, "No sign of the crew, but the Theology Team was attacked by a vakkar pack, and a 'groth fired on the shuttle when they evacuated." The holoprojector finished booting, displaying schematics of the divine angles of an Enkindler installation as well as the half-buried, rakish form of a Theocracy Vessel landed in its center. Valor recognized it, a Desolation frigate, a glorified transport loaded with eezo and ecosystem-ruining warbeasts or plantlife. "The Vessel's a Desolation. Korga's Madness. We think it's one of The Butcher's vessels that fled after The Assassination. Its existence is an offense against the Enkindlers. The fucking blasphemy of it daring to exist on the Sacred Ring? A travesty since the Desolation of High Charity. You all know what's going to happen here."

"I am to lead a kill team, then? Cleanse the installation without damaging the Enkindler Ruins?" asked Valor. He was eager to get started, purging such a blasphemy was the height of devotion a Templar such as him could achieve, and the thought that the Gruul contraption was defiling the single most holy installation found in a thousand years made him sick to his stomach.

"'Fraid not, Templar," said Isavi, "Gruul Warbeasts in the ecosystem

means any artificial structure is probably infested with them. The Grand Citadel itself-" She waved and the holoprojector changed again, displaying the schematics of an absolutely titanic enkindler structure, awe inspiring in its beauty. It was the largest single complex on the entire Sacred Ring, and had been the target of most of their scans and preparation once they'd detected it. "-may be infected with some sort of blasphemous xenolife. So you're going to be guarding the Theology Team."

Valor's enthusiasm faded, and he thought the Minister must have seen it, for warm, comforting tones of light washed the chamber as the Minister approached him and spoke, "What the Other has not said is that This One wishes to accompany the Theology Team itself. This One was not planning on bringing a guard beyond the Other, but the discovery of the Blasphemers and their Beasts mandates an honor guard for the Theology Team; to do otherwise would be irresponsible. The guard for such an expedition must be picked carefully, of course, chosen from only the best of our soldiers. To do otherwise would be an affront both to the Most Holy Enkindlers and the Honored Art of Theology."

"Due to this mandate, as well as the great and renowned skill of the Other Valor, as related by the Shipmaster of this Vessel, This One felt that the Other deserved the honor of leading the honor guard of the Theological Expedition into the Grand Citadel. It is also expected to personally choose the rest of the honor guard." There was a pause as Valor processed the wash of comforting light. It stretched for long, long moments as Valor realized exactly what he had been assigned to do, the magnitude of the task that he had been entrusted with. He was to guard, with his handpicked unit of sangheili and san'shyuum, a holy expedition to the most holy forerunner site ever discovered. Failure meant death and humiliation, possible damnation in the magnitude of such a failure.

Success? Success was as good as Consecration. A place in the Hall of Hallowed, a station reserved, in most circumstances, for Hanar and Drell. A place denied to all but a scant few dozen san'shyuum. "The Other is grinning, does it require medical attention?" asked The Minister, obviously amused. The pun didn't translate, but Valor knew enough of the Divine Tongue to snicker at the joke. There was a twitch of the ministers tentacles, a show of approval, before the room was once more bathed in his light, "The Other is also expected to pick the guard for the Other Saleem's return to the secondary facility. This one trusts that the Other's choice shall be made swiftly and wisely."

"And this one thinks that we've spent quite enough time on what could have been accomplished with a holo message," said Isavi. "We need to speak with the Shipmaster. You will not detain us, of course?"

"I...of course," said Valor, still shocked at the ease with which Isavi interrupted The Minister. Isavi didn't wait. She motioned at one of the doors, waited for The Minister to float towards it, and then took point ahead of him. She gave the room a cheery wave as she left.

There was a pause that stretched several seconds, wherein the group absorbed what had just happened. Valor thought for a moment, then his mind switched gears, running over rosters, commendations and

discipline lists to see who would be best for the missions, both the Honor Guard he was to lead, as well as the guard for Saleem's Theology Team. He turned towards his men, his eyes settling on Rtak. The red armored elite returned his gaze steadily, waiting for his orders. "Orsummee, you're leading Saleem's honor guard detail. Twenty soldiers out of Green and Grey Choirs," he said, mentally cycling through a list of possible second in commands and scout teams, "Kag will be your Second. He will have his scouting unit. The Blasphemy must be purged. You have your run of the armory, my authorization, and requisition whatever dropship you deem necessary."

"As you command, Templar," said Rtak, kneeling towards Valor, "I am honored by your trust." Valor motioned towards Rtak, and the red-armored sangheili rose steadily before continuing, "Sir, what takes priority? Preserving the Theology Team or purging the Blasphemy?"

"Purging the Blasphemy, of course. The Theology Team is honored, and should be protected with your lives," said Valor, "But the Blasphemy is utterly unforgivable. Attempt not to choose, but if you must I will take responsibility." He stalked towards his command module, a three fingered hand floating across names on his omnitool as he approached. "Tal'Ok, inform Templars Vruta and Uron that they shall be accompanying me in the honor guard. Ar'Ok, inform Chieftain Bosphorous that he shall be doing the same," he called to a pair of Yanme'e adjutants as he sat, "Tell them of the gravity of the situation, and to pick three of their best to accompany them as their detail. We leave when the Minister demands, so tell them to be ready at all times until I say otherwise." He called up his terminal, entering passcodes and hymns and delegating the systems command functions as he browsed, "Vel'Adeem, the Choirs are in your capable hands, you will likely be expected to hand over command to one of the Sangheili upon my departure, but wait for an order to do so."

As for the rest of you, it is, and has always been, an honor to lead you all. I am unworthy of the trust you put in me as a commander and as an interpreter of the Enkindlers' Will in the material, in return I trust that you shall enforce the Enkindlers' Will in my absence. I pray for your good health and may the Enkindlers guide you in my absence."

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January 25th 2183, Lascivious Eternity, The Wreck, Kovai Rift, Deep Terminus

"Welcome to Lascivious Eternity, treat the employees gently, don't cause trouble and remember, the mgalekgolo at the door have free reign to deal with rowdy customers however they wish," announced a sultry, pale-skinned kig-yar from a podium at the center of what was once a command deck. Dozens of dancers, real and holograms, danced around her in various stages of undress, giving the clubs various patrons a show to remember. The air was thick with the smells of drugs, drink and sex, and members of every species mingled in the dim lighting.

Unggoy ingested copious amounts of narcotics through masks. Turians smoked lines of Hachix and MegaJet off of scantily clad women. A pair of asari snorted lines of Meth+ off a kig-yar's snout. Humans inhaled Red Sand and Novacoke through drug masks. Dozens of patrons sat at a

counter built around the podium, alternately drinking, chatting and watching the dancers.

And in the midst of it all was Kag. Just under six feet tall, unscarred, bald and dressed in the mottled greens of a business suit, the kig-yar did not exactly cut an imposing figure. The occasional shake, which he constantly told himself was caused by disease instead of apprehension, didn't exactly help the image.

He strode through the crowds, dodging around drugged and otherwise distracted sapients about to crash into him as he made his way to the bar counter. He ignored a human-batarian couple giggling at his suit, gracefully sidestepped a jiralhanae's attempt to trip him and eventually found what he was looking for, a pair of empty seats almost directly in front of a bartender, an elcor.

"Friendly: Hello there cutie," said the bartender in an elcor monotone, the pheromones wafting off...his? Her? Its? body practically slapping Kag in the face, "You here for a drink?

Seductively: Or something a bit more...interesting?"

There was a brief moment as Kag attempted to puzzle out precisely what the Elcor had just said, and then a horrifying realization as the scent of barely restrained lust hit him in the face. The Elcor rolled its shoulders and face forwards in what he was reasonably certain was the equivalent a lewd grin. "No, Enkindlers no," said Kag hurriedly, "Just drinks. Uh, Kardel Red for me. A Khar'Shan Sunrise as well, I'm, uh, expecting a friend."

There was hesitation. He could just order the drinks. Saleem would come, they'd talk, like old times. Recount the war and the halo, maybe, then Saleem would leave. Everything would be fine. He didn't have to do anything else, he could just walk away from the deal. Except-

"And, uh, Tristyl in the drinks, I imagine we'll both be a bit tired," he said, finally. There wasn't a choice, not really. He couldn't just walk away from the deal, it simply wasn't an option. He'd played with fire, and for that, well, someone had to burn. And he had too much on the line for it to be him.

"Coquettishly: Anything for you dear," said the elcor, making Kag's scaly skin crawl with another waft of overpowering pheromones as the bartender began mixing drinks, "Lustily: Give me your shaft." Kag snapped backwards, about to dash and look for another seat before the elcor clarified, "Amused: Credit shaft, dear. While I'm sure we're all interested in your other shaft, I couldn't possibly ask for it in public."

Kag calmed down, handing over a credstick as he scanned the bar for the human he was looking for. A turian next to him, a transparent mask over her mouth, stood up to leave. Several humans followed a rowdy looking asari into a backroom. The elcor handed him back his credstick and finished drink. He downed the drink, letting it burn down his throat as he continued to look for Saleem. An elcor sang poetry with a Mgalekgolo in a corner. Several Kig-Yar crowded a quarian, dancing suggestively for his near-naked form. No Saleem. He handed the credstick and his glass over, got a refill, drank again.

Ungoyy led a volus to a methane-atmosphere room. A turian in battle armor grabbed a sangheili patron by the mandibles, pulling him down and sticking her tongue deep into his mouth. No Saleem.

He turned back to the bartender, planning to order another drink, when someone tapped him on the shoulder. "Ya Habeebi," said Saleem before Kag's translator kicked in, "I did not recognize you without the, ah, battle armor. The Sunrise is for me, I hope?"

Kag breathed a sigh of relief, a genuine one, as he turned towards the pale human taking the seat next to him. "You should wear a translator, Saleem, better for everyone," says Kag, hesitating slightly. There's another chance. Throw away the sunrise. Order a different drink. Save Saleem. But it isn't an option. He wipes one of his eyes, passing the hesitation off as tiredness. "Well, I can't exactly drink it, can I? Of course it's for you, you deserve it," he says.

"Thank you, I've had the worst day," replies Saleem, downing the drink. Kag winces as his friend seals his own fate, "Been running from Ex-Theocracy men for weeks. One of them set a war varren on me. A war varren! For a washed up old theologician! Surely there are easier ways for whatever cults survived the dissolution to acquire humans, no?" Kag nods in silent agreement, still horrified at what he's done. "Ah, this drink is excellent. Anyways, ah, they stopped trying to, well, take me alive. Gave them the slip at Acheron, but, uh, they'll probably be after me again in a day or two. Heh, been jumping at my shadow all week. But hey, now you're here, nothing going to get me past you, eh?" Kag gave a weak laugh, the thought 'nothing except for me' refusing to leave his mind as Saleem refilled his Sunrise and downed it again.

"I'm not so sure, Saleem," said Kag nervously, "I got married, settled down. Haven't done the...the violence thing in a while, you're sure you want to come to me? The...ring was just about my last real combat. You might be better off if you, you know, used another option." He had to keep the conversation going. Make things look natural. Like heart failure, disease, stress.

"I don't have many options, my friend," replied Saleem sullenly before downing yet another sunrise from the tainted glass, "No money for mercenaries, most contacts have abandoned me, had to run from my resources, and after the Ring, well, the Primacy isn't an option. I've got you and a Glory II, and I know what I'm doing with that if everything else fails."

Kag looked sideways at Saleem. "No," he said, "You're not killing yourself and you're not drinking any more sunrises either." It was stupid, he realized, to be worried about his friends health after having murdered the man himself, but despite everything, despite the dread necessity, Saleem was a friend, and, well, Kag cared, even if he knew it didn't matter. He grabbed Saleem by the arm, gently, but he didn't think Saleem could really tell the difference. "We're taking a walk, let you clear your head, The Wreck's safe, no Gruulian bastard's going to attack you here. I'll find you a room on the _Transcension_, it's a converted luxury liner, great hotel."

Kag didn't give Saleem, who was beginning to visibly sweat from either intoxication or his reaction to the Tristyl, a chance to object. He pulled the human up, flung one of the man's broad arms

around his shoulder and began walking outside. One of the mgalekgolo bouncers rumbled sympathetically at him, apologizing for his 'fun' being cut short by Saleem's drunkenness. He was tempted to say something nasty, but resisted the urge. The bouncer was just doing his job.

Just like Kag.

The pair strode into the street, an enormous thoroughfare built atop what was once the top of a Lorica Class Cruiser. Saleem beginning to cough from his reaction to the Tristyl. The drug, harmless to most people, had...unfortunate reactions with Saleem's genemods. He'd be dead within fifteen minutes. Relatively painlessly, thankfully. They reached an alley, and Saleem excused himself, throwing up into a waste-processor. Kag darted over to his side, his lower lip twitching with guilt.

"You're not okay, are you?" asked Kag entirely rhetorically, moving to support Saleem again. The man waved him off, pushing him away when the kig-yar attempted to force the issue.

"I'll be fine," said Saleem, stumbling away from Kag, "We survived the Halo, we survived Exedic, I survived...well, a bit of drink isn't going to do me in after that." Kag stepped towards his friend, eyebrows narrowing as he attempted to puzzle out the last reference. What had Saleem been involved in? What could he possibly have found after...after the ring?

Saleem collapsed. Kag panicked.

The rest...was a blur. He called emergency services, waited, cleared Saleem's air passage, attempted to keep him alive. They arrived. He rode to the hospital in the airvan, sitting next to Saleem. The hospital was a converted cruise liner. Large, fancy. There was a waiting room. Saleem was wheeled into an emergency room. Kag waited outside.

It took them twenty one minutes to proclaim him dead. Natural causes. A heart attack induced by heavy drinking.

It took two more for him to receive the message. A simple text code to his omnitool, authenticated from Fat Jacques himself.

"Thank you for your assistance in this matter, your wife will be on the station within the hour. Payment, as well as impressively substantial housing for remaining discreet in the matter, will be delivered shortly.

Sincerely,

Fat Jacques."

He'd done it. Finally. Seven years of running, hiding, changing and killing. Repeated attempts to escape, to change, to slip the dread shadow of the Halo. And he'd done it. He was free. He had his family. He had a home and...allies. He could finally stop running.

As he drifted towards the docks to meet his wife, he tried, desperately tried, to convince himself it was worth it.

End
file.